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SUBJECT: GROWING DIVIDE WITHIN PRESIDENT VENETIAAN'S
COALITION - A LOOK AT PERTJAJA LUHUR

REF: PARAMARIBO 219

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¶1. (U) Summary. President Ronald Venetiaan's eight-party governing coalition is becoming increasingly fractured as squabbles have escalated into testy standoffs in recent weeks. The Javanese-based Pertjaja Luhur's (PL) temporary refusal to attend National Assembly sessions (DNA) over a personnel dispute with President Venetiaan exemplifies the ongoing gamesmanship and posturing that have preoccupied New Front Plus partners since coming together last summer; many are doubting the lasting power of the coalition. This is the second in a series of cables on the coalition woes focusing on the ambitious and unpredictable PL. Perhaps even more than the all-Maroon A-Combination (AC) featured in the first cable, PL is pivotal in keeping the coalition's majority intact. End Summary.

PERTJAJA LUHUR: A PIVOTAL PARTNER

¶2. (U) As a result of an aggressive election campaign spearheaded by party chair and DNA speaker Paul Somohardjo, PL increased its number of DNA seats in the May 2005 election and was key in allowing President Venetiaan to maintain his thin majority. Of the 51 DNA seats available last May, PL's DNA seat count increased from four to six, while President Venetiaan's Creole-based National Party Suriname (NPS) lost eight seats (16 to 8), and Vice-President Ramdien Sardjoe's Hindustani-based United Reform Party (VHP) lost three seats (10 to 7). With the NPS and VHP suffering heavy electoral losses, President Venetiaan's four party New Front coalition (NPS, VHP, PL, labor-oriented SPA) lost its majority and was forced to caucus with the three party AC coalition and the single seat DA91 party to form a 29-seat governing coalition dubbed the New Front Plus. In the new configuration, if PL were to pull its six seats out of the coalition, the President and other coalition partners would lose their majority.

¶3. (SBU) Considered by many to be a shrewd politician, Somohardjo used his new political leverage after the election to gain the DNA speaker position for himself, but only after an initial push for the vice-presidency. Many scoffed at his becoming speaker based on his unsavory past. In 2002, while serving as Minister of Social Affairs and

Housing, Somohardjo allegedly accepted bribes to grant a contract for the construction of 1,000 houses, but the claim was dismissed in court. In 2003 Somohardjo was sent on mandatory leave by President Venetiaan and subsequently resigned after he was found guilty of sexually harassing a teenage beauty pageant contestant.

14. (SBU) Somohardjo, age 63, does not seem constrained by this past; he is working hard to bring all ethnic Javanese voters under his party's umbrella, while at the same attracting ethnic Chinese voters, including the growing number of recently-arrived Chinese immigrants. According to Embassy sources, he is also targeting members of Maroon communities, contact eased through his party's control of the Ministry responsible for land zoning, an important issue for the Maroon constituency.

PERTAJAJA LUHUR FLEXES ITS MUSCLES

15. (U) While the eight parties of the New Front Plus continue to publicly maintain their unwieldy coalition is a strong one, the defense of narrow party interests is causing serious fissures. Each party views the ministries under their control as enclaves for their own party's political rule. This attitude led to a serious squabble between PL and President Venetiaan over PL Minister of Education Edwin Wolf's announcement on April 10 that he planned to replace his Deputy Permanent Secretary of Technical Services Rudy Wezenhagen, an NPS party member, with Ronny Tamsiran, a DNA and executive board member of PL. Wolf had been acting on the orders of Somohardjo and his PL board.

16. (U) Although it is normal practice for Ministers to suspend or reshuffle top officials at their Ministries to accommodate party members and confidants, the staff at the

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Ministry of Education voiced strong objects to this particular move to President Venetiaan. Speaking in a radio interview the next day, President Venetiaan publicly admonished Minister Wolf, saying only the President and Council of Ministers have the authority to reshuffle senior government officials and called him inexperienced. The President also publicly corrected Somohardjo, who had earlier said that the Minister of Education would be fully authorized to do so.

17. (U) Upset by the remarks, Somohardjo stated in a party press release on April 13 that the party was "very offended" by the president's statements and that, until further notice, PL Ministers and DNA members would not attend meetings of the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers. This prevented the DNA from convening since the absence of PL's six seats prevented the New Front Plus from forming a parliamentary quorum, as members of opposition parties also chose not attend sessions in order to deny the coalition a quorum.

18. (U) The boycott only lasted until April 19, however, when closed-door talks held by New Front Plus leaders led to PL ending their protest and agreeing to keep Wezenhagen in his position. George Hering, spokesman for PL and personal advisor of Somohardjo, said the media had blown statements made by President Venetiaan out of proportion, and it was clear now that Venetiaan had not intended to offend the party or its officials.

19. (U) A permanent break in the coalition was once again avoided by coalition partners finding common ground and communicating with each other after the fact, but skeptics wonder how long they can continue this constant wrangling and petty squabbling. During the days following heavy flooding in the interior that began on May 6-7, Somohardjo was quick to carp about flood relief delays, a position

clearly unwelcomed by his coalition partners organizing the disaster response. The trend looks likely to continue with upcoming discussions for nominations of Ambassadors and supervisory boards at various public sector companies likely to cause a stir; Somohardjo has already indicated that he will settle for nothing less than six PL ambassadorships.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Somohardjo's dramatic form of protest was aimed at reminding his partners of his party's importance to the coalition's survival. While cooperation between the A-Combination and the New Front has been less than stellar (see reftel), some observers close to the Embassy single out the opportunist and ambitious Somohardjo as the true threat to the coalition's stability. A long-time Somohardjo confidant told POLOFF that Somohardjo is satisfied for the moment with his position, but in the future it is highly possible that he would seek new partners if this were to be to his advantage. It was unlikely that Somohardjo was truly mollified when his recent differences with Venetiaan were settled, but that he was biding his time for a more decisive opportunity to strike. At speeches made at a May 6 birthday celebration for Somohardjo, all coalition partners reaffirmed their commitment to a tight-knit coalition, except Somohardjo, who passionately bragged of PL's increasing popularity and how his party would eventually win just as many seats as the NPS and VHP. He mentioned the coalition only as an afterthought.

LEONARD